

News from the Wyoming Department of Health and the Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation

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Prescription Drug Abuse Deaths, Crimes Rise in Wyoming

Death records and law enforcement statistics illustrate that abuse of prescription medication is a growing problem in Wyoming, according to the Wyoming Department of Health (WDH) and the Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation (DCI).

A review of official death records kept by the WDH Vital Statistics Services Program from 2005 through 2008 shows there were 50 deaths linked to prescription drugs in 2005, 90 in 2006, 96 in 2007 and 103 in 2008. During the same period of time there was only one Wyoming death linked to heroin and nine linked to cocaine. Numbers represent cases where the drugs were listed as either a primary or secondary cause of death.

“These statistics certainly demonstrate an alarming increase in prescription medication-related deaths and should be an eye opener for many Wyoming residents,” said Rodger McDaniel, WDH deputy director for mental health and substance abuse services.

At the same time DCI has experienced a 400 percent increase in prescription drug diversion investigations during the last four years, reports Kebin Haller, DCI deputy director.

“The unlawful abuse and misuse of prescription drugs is clearly a widespread problem in Wyoming. It’s an immediate law enforcement and community threat,” Haller said.

Roxanne Homar, state pharmacist with WDH, said commonly abused drugs include pain relievers such as OxyContin, Hydrocodone and Vicodin; depressants such as Valium and Xanax, which are used to treat anxiety and sleep disorders; and stimulants such as Ritalin and Adderall, which are used for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and sleep disorders.

McDaniel said prescription drug abuse is frequently overlooked as a serious concern because the medications involved are widely available and are perceived as safe by many people. “But the dangers associated with abuse are clearly real,” he said.

“It’s a problem that has also unfortunately reached our state’s youth,” McDaniel added. In 2008, the Wyoming Prevention Needs Assessment indicated that approximately 14 percent of 10th grade students and 15 percent of 12th grade student have used prescription drugs at least once to get high.

According to Haller, those looking to get prescription medications illegally for their own use rely on a number of methods. “Fraud, forgery, doctor-shopping and illegal buying are common but often overlooked sources,” he said. “Many people are also surprised to hear there is

frequently theft during real estate open houses, stealing from family members and robbery by workers in homes.”

McDaniel said, “The good news is that that many key representatives, led by Wyoming’s U.S. Attorney Kelly Rankin, have come together to form Wyoming’s Prescription Drug Abuse Task Force.” The group’s aim is to prevent the increasing abuse of prescription medications while ensuring they remain available for patients in need.

Within the Wyoming Department of Health, Homar noted her office has a “lock-in” program to help reduce fraud for Wyoming EqualityCare (Medicaid) clients who are identified as using multiple providers and obtaining large quantities of prescription medications. Homar’s office also works closely with the Wyoming Board of Pharmacy’s Prescription Drug Monitoring Program to prevent doctor shopping and to inform providers about prescription drug abuse and fraud.

“We will continue educating providers, both those who prescribe medications and pharmacists, as well as the community at large about this issue and what can be done to prevent its further growth,” Homar said. “Simple steps everyone can take right away are to clean out their medicine cabinets and carefully protect the prescription medications they have in their home to prevent possible misuse.”

For more information, please contact the Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services Division at (307) 777-7094 or the Office of Pharmacy Services at (307) 777-6923 or (800) 438-5785.

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